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We Need Social Inventions To Deal With Overbreeding

IN A RECENT issue of Science magazine, John R. Platt, a well-known biophysicist who is now associate director of the Mental Health Research Institute at the University of Michigan, exhorts scientists about "What We Must Do."

After a gloomy inventory of national and world problems, he calls for a mobilization of scientific task forces for highly coordinated, large-scale work on the major issues. (The Manhattan Project is inevitably thought of as a parallel; it may be mischievous to recall that it was rationally founded on a premise later proven false, namely that Hitler was racing to produce a Nazi superweapon. That mobilization thus generated a magnificent technical solution to a nonproblem, and has, in turn, changed world history in ways we have still to fathom.)

By far the most interesting part of Prof. Platt's essay is a list of social inventions including Keynesian economics, opinion polls, operations analysis, game theory, input-output economics, credit cards and income tax withholding. Some remarks about these might be unprintable, but they can indeed have a large, quick impact.

OVERPOPULATION is near the top of anyone's list of social problems. However optimistically we dispense

with other aspects of it, we cannot evade its pressure on an irreplaceable natural heritage and the accumulation of our garbage and other pollutants.

But typical American couples (as shown by Judith Blake's studies) still expect to produce between three and four children for an ideal family. We have found no humane way to regulate this market, to restrain a couple from hogging more than its fair share of the common resource—human living space on the planet. We begin to hear demands for a radical solution, and before these are irresistible, we should seek out and try new social inventions. We do not want a nightmarish secret service of genetic and demographic police.

Our difficulties are compounded by a pattern of social injustice that leaves an underprivileged class that believes it has nothing to lose, so lacks a motive to refrain from breeding more. Widespread poverty also turns any hypothetical punishment of irresponsible parents into penalties on innocent children.

THE RECENT proposal by Sen. George S. McGovern (D-S.D.) for a universal family allowance based on \$50 a month per child suggests a constructive approach to a meaningful but compassionate social experiment.

But it was promptly and, I believe, correctly criticized on the floor of the House by Rep. John B. Anderson (R-Ill.) as an aggravating stimulus to population growth, an irresponsible birth incentive. It is also totally unrealistic to expect an appropriation of \$35 billion for a program that might help the poor to continue to outbreed the rich.

We have surprisingly little information to support guesses about the impact of children's allowances on population growth. Regardless of a long history of such allowances, for example, Canada's birth rates have tended to fluctuate in close parallel with those of the U.S. in response to major economic and social trends.

Sen. McGovern's proposal should be amended so as to start with allowances only for the first two children of a given mother. It might also make the same allowance to a married woman before and after her first child, so as not to hasten child-bearing.

It would not take long to determine statistically whether this approach could have a significant effect on family policy. If it did, we should soon count relatively fewer third and fourth births per family.

PROGRAMS like this are not as expensive as they appear at first. We do not mean to turn our backs on the welfare of the young, and by one route or another we must provide essential services and food to needy children. The McGovern proposal, with the suggested amendment, carries the possibility of managing the limitations in our resources in a way that would allow experimenting with solutions to the "incidental" problem of overbreeding.

At the very least, a considered debate on these proposals would expose the realities of our needs and pretensions on designing a future with a manageable population.